









5

# NOT TO BE SERVED, BUT TO SERVE.

---

## A Sermon

Preached in Westminster Abbey, on Sunday Afternoon,  
May 14th, 1899, by the

REV. J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON, D.D.,  
*Canon in Residence.*

---

“The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.”—  
*St. Mark x., 45.*

WE lose much of the meaning of our Lord's words by reason of their very familiarity. His most remarkable utterances become by frequent repetition deprived of their freshness. Long use rounds off their sharp edges. They become gradually modified in accordance with certain traditions of application. A portion of their meaning is assumed to be the whole, and their startling sound is muffled into tones which no longer jar against our ordinary conventions.

Take as an example one of His most tremendous sayings: “Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (St. Mark viii., 34). What have we made that to mean?

When Peter denied Christ, what did it mean? It meant an absolute refusal to admit that he had any kind of relation to Him: “I know not the Man.”

When Christ took up His Cross, what did that mean, and whither did he go? He carried it to die upon it.

Could any words be found that would more strongly express that the individual was to cancel himself? that he was to refuse

to recognise any kind of self-interest, however "enlightened," as the principle of life? that he was not to live for himself, not to think of himself, not even to talk about himself—hardest perhaps of all?

Could any words be found to express more strongly that he was to throw himself away for others? to take up voluntarily the instrument of his painful death—not even to wait until it was forced upon him?

Could any words be more violent, more utterly uncompromising? Was it not to declare, as the only rule of life, that self-seeking must be changed into its direct opposite—self-giving, to the very last breath?

And yet we have come, by a long process of emptying Christ's words of their meaning, to call it "denying ourselves," when we refuse to buy some luxury, when we do some trivial thing that we dislike, when we abstain from certain meats on certain days of the year.

And when some trouble comes upon us that we cannot escape, and we take it with common patience, we call that "taking up our cross." We talk of little daily crosses—and in so speaking we get as near to Christ's meaning as the little silver cross, which you hang round neck, or dangle on your watch-chain, is to the heavy wooden cross that supported the weight of a crucified man.

I have chosen an extreme instance to make my meaning clear. But in scores of less striking instances we are doing the same thing. We are missing the meaning of Christ's sayings by reason of their very familiarity. The one remedy is to go back in each case and see what they meant to those who first heard them, when they had not passed into customary phrases, but were startlingly new. Then we may get some conception of what their true lesson is for ourselves to-day.

The text which I have chosen has suffered considerably by the process of familiarisation.



1. The expression "the Son of Man" suggest to us now simply one of many names of Jesus Christ. We hardly pause to ask why Christ used it: why, for example, He did not in this passage rather say: "I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister."

The title was a new one, so far as we can tell, freshly fashioned by Himself, as the mode in which He wished to describe His nature and mission. It is not found as a title in the Old Testament. The passage in Daniel, which we read on the evening of Ascension Day, does not really contain it. For there the words are properly rendered "one like *a* son of man," and not "one like *the* Son of Man." We ourselves are sons of men: and "one like a son of man" means one whose appearance was that of a man. Again, the Prophet Ezekiel is addressed by God as "son of man"—that is to say, he is constantly reminded that he is a man: but he is never called "the Son of Man."

The prefix "son of" occurs very often in the Bible, in phrases which characterise a person. Thus we have the expressions "son of valour," "son of Belial," "son of wickedness," "son of the morning"; and in the New Testament, "son of perdition," and "sons (or 'children') of this world," and "sons of light."

Thus we see that "a son of man" means one whose characteristic (on which we wish to dwell) is that he is a man. So in the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, which delights to repeat its thought in heightened language, we have such phrases as:

"God is not *a man*, that He should lie; neither the *son of man*, that He should repent" (Numb. xxiii., 19).

"What is *man*, that Thou art mindful of him: and the *son of man*, that Thou visitest him?" (Ps. viii., 4).

Accordingly when Christ spoke of Himself again and again as "Son of Man," the first thought that would arise in the minds of His hearers would be that He was asserting Himself to be *truly Man*.

But He did not speak of Himself merely as *a son of man* : He spoke of Himself as “the Son of Man.” That is to say, He claimed to be in some way a unique representation of the human race. He was not merely a human being, He was “the Human Being”—the true Man, who in some way stood for all men, in whom all human life was summed up and represented.

An interesting parallel to this title is a title which He never used of Himself, though others used it of Him : He even seems to have refused to limit Himself to it. I mean “the Son of David.” Every descendant of David was, in the language of those days, “a son of David,” just as every Israelite was “a son of Abraham.” But “the Son of David” was David’s unique representative, the great king of the future, who was to sit on David’s throne in Jerusalem, according to the general belief. Christ claimed to be more than this—more than “the Son of David,” the Jewish king for the Jews. He claimed to be “the Son of Man”—the Man for all men.

Thus we are getting at the first meaning of these words. They signified that Christ was *truly Man*, and also *representatively Man*. So we begin to see a reason in His use of this title in such great sayings as, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath : therefore the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (St. Mark ii., 28) : and again, “The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins.”

2. We pass now to the second part of our text, and find that it too has been rendered far less striking by a general change in the application of words.

As a rule you will observe that words have a tendency to fall in meaning—to begin high and end low. The word “knave” was a very respectable word once, for it simply meant a “boy” : so too the word “villain,” which meant a “countryman.” Some words even now may have a very high sense in one context, and a much inferior sense in another. “Charity” originally meant the highest of Christian virtues, purest and most unselfish love. It often



means now no more than giving money to the poor to save ourselves the trouble of really helping them.

The word "minister" is an example of the opposite tendency. It originally meant the commonest form of servant: it was laid hold of by Christianity to denote the high service rendered by the leaders of the Church. St. Paul frequently calls himself "a minister of the Gospel"; and the term has found an abiding-place of honour in the Christian Ministry.

But here we are concerned with its first meaning. If we read the parallel section in St. Luke's Gospel, we shall see how strongly this original sense was felt (xxii., 27): "Whether is the greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? But I am in the midst of you as he that serveth." The word 'serveth' then is the same word as elsewhere is translated 'ministereth.' It means serving the food, waiting at table. Which is the greater—the host and his guests, or the waiter? That is Christ's question. "But," He adds, "I am among you as a waiter." Are the words startling? They were meant to be startling. The disciples had been striving for pre-eminence: they had been asking which was to have precedence—who was the greatest among them. Christ's answer is that His standards are not as our standards. The law of service is the law of life. He who most humbly renders services lives the truest life. "I am among you as he that serveth," as a waiter at the table of another man.

3. We are now in a position to bring the two parts of our text together again, and to look at it as a whole.

"The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." That is to say, He who is the true Man, who lives the truest human life, serves others, waits upon others, instead of seeking that others should wait upon Him. He came into the world for this very purpose—to help, not to be helped; to serve, and not to be served. He regards others as the master or

the guests at the table, and He claims as His part only that He should wait on them.

Read the Gospel through once again in the light of this one saying, and see whether the story of Christ's life is consistent with it. See how busy His days were: "There were many coming and going, and they had no time, no, not so much as to eat." Thronging multitudes pursue Him, all wanting help, wanting healing, or wanting teaching. His was a short life: it was all over at thirty-three. And the pressure of it was very great. "I *must* work," He once said: "I must work the work of Him that sent Me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work" (St. John ix., 4). To the last hours it was the same: the night before His death, He took a basin and a towel, and went round to all His disciples, and washed their feet—a servant to the last—a servant even to Judas Iscariot. It was a symbol of His whole life. And later in that same night, He gave Himself away to them yet more completely: "This is My Body: eat it . . . This is My Blood: drink ye all of it." In life and in death He gave Himself to them. The Cross came to interpret all this by a supreme act of self-sacrifice. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Are there any limits to this self-giving? they must have asked, when He washed and wiped their feet. The Cross gave the answer: No, there are no limits at all.

This, then, was the life of "the Son of Man." This was His ideal for humanity: not self-extinction, but self-dedication—absolute devotion to the service of men.

It was the purpose of God to renew the life of humanity by making this the starting-point. When Christ left the visible world and passed back into the invisible world, His life on earth was not sharply broken off. It was lived on in the little band of close followers, whose faith had been sadly shattered by the Crucifixion, but restored by the Resurrection. They represented

the Christ-life still being lived among men. They were filled as we shall specially remember next Sunday with His Holy Spirit, and inspired to lead the same life of service.

We saw last Sunday how they began as a Brotherhood bound together by mutual service and helpfulness in "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." We saw the mighty force which this new life exerted in the world. We need not tell again the mournful tale of how it came to be broken up. We may rather ask what are we doing to restore it to any measure of reality again. Two things we may all of us do.

(1.) We may cherish the ideal. We may study the Gospel, with fresh earnestness, and learn how Christ actually lived when He was amongst us in the flesh. We may go on to study the Acts of the Apostles, and see how He continued to live on in His Body the Church. When they were persecuted, He was persecuted, and He cried from heaven, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *Me*?" When St. Peter healed a man he said "Aeneas, Jesus Christ is healing thee." He was one with them, and they were one with Him. He was carrying on His own life of service through their hands and feet and lips.

The Son of Man was still ministering to the needs of men. The life of service was being reproduced on a larger scale in a Society, the members of which formed one Body, with one heart and one soul; one Body, in which individuals were but limbs, not perfect in themselves, but perfectly adapted to the service of the whole.

That is God's ideal for the life of man. We have forgotten it, and talked too much of the rights of the individual, not recognising that the highest right of the individual is the right to serve with all his powers the welfare of the whole.

(2.) The second thing we can all do is to strive in our own limited spheres to carry out this life of service. Every one can do that. Every one can serve some one. There is an infinite variety of forms of service, just as there are infinite cells and

## SERMON.

tissues in the body, all needed in working order to make up a healthy life of the whole.

Some of you perhaps can do little more than try to serve those in your own household, to make their lives easier, happier, better.

Some of you have larger opportunities, and of you more will be required. You have control of others, from your position or your wealth.

Some of you can be great strong hands of Christ, lifting the fallen, staying the tottering; righting great public wrongs; moving masses of men by deed and speech. It is not what service you render that counts most; but whether you are really rendering service.

It may be that you have been accustomed to be waited on; to be served by others: and that you have largely destroyed your powers of service in consequence. Doubtless you will be a very unprofitable servant—especially at your first entry upon your work. Yet begin: it is the only life. God will teach you how to live it, if you will kneel and humbly ask Him for the sake of Jesus Christ, who is at once our Servant and our Lord.













